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ABSTRACT

Forty-four family-oriented, prime time television program episodes (30 hours) aired in November and December 1982 were selected for content analysis from 12 commercial television series which met selection criteria for Nielsen Television rating, airing time, and theme. Family oriented programming was defined as any series with a primary theme that centered on family life with primary characters that included parent(s) and children under 18. Parental behaviors were coded that reflected performance of parental role, child rearing patterns, and children's responses to those roles and patterns. Results indicated that relatively large numbers of parenting behaviors were being illustrated in the programs viewed. Television fathers were somewhat more active as parents than were mothers, and both mothers and fathers were portrayed in traditional ways, even though many more non-traditional than traditional family structures were presented. Television children responded differently to performance of parental roles and to child rearing patterns according to the sex of the television parent. Based on findings, several recommendations were made for parent and family life education and further related research. A four-page reference list is provided. (Author/LMM)

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PARENTING BEHAVIORS IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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PARENTING BEHAVIORS IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS

Abstract

1 This study used the content analysis research technique to identify
2 parenting behaviors portrayed in family-oriented prime-time television
3 programs. The behaviors coded reflected performance of the parental role,
4 child rearing patterns, and children's responses to those roles and patterns.
5 Results indicated that relatively large numbers of parenting behaviors were
6 being illustrated in the programs viewed. Television fathers were somewhat
7 more active as parents than were mothers and both mothers and fathers were
8 portrayed in traditional ways, even though many more non-traditional than
9 traditional family structures were represented. Television children responded
10 differently to performance of parental roles and to child rearing patterns
11 according to sex of the television parent. Based on the findings, several
12 recommendations were made for parent and family life education and further
13 related research.

1 The parental role has been of interest to a wide variety of professionals,
2 including those in child development, adult development, family sociology,
3 family therapy, family life education, and home economics education. Each
4 of these disciplines has recognized that parenting behaviors are influenced
5 by a number of factors both inside and outside the family system. Those
6 factors which have been recognized and studied include: family structure
7 and size (Schlesinger, 1966; Zajonc, 1976) parental age (Seth and Khanna,
8 1978); sex, age and number of children (Knox and Wilson, 1978; Nye, Carlson,
9 and Garrett, 1979; Sears, Maccoby, and Levin, 1957; Weinrub and Frankel,
10 1977); rural/urban living environment (Snow, 1981); socioeconomic and educa-
11 tional level (Gecas, 1979; Wright and Wright, 1976); sex of parent (Carter
12 and Welch, 1981); religion (Duvall, 1971); ethnic orientation (Lambert,
13 Triandis, and Wolf, 1958); work pattern of parents (Holmstrom, 1972); and
14 the child him/herself (Bell and Harper, 1977).

15 One potential influence upon parenting behavior that has received little
16 attention is the mass media. Carlson and Crase (1983) content analyzed
17 childrearing information in popular magazines, and Ramsdell (1973) and Fisher
18 (1974) examined marital and family roles shown on television. There has
19 also been other research concerned with adult television viewing patterns
20 (LoSciuto, 1971) the effect of television on adults (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman,
21 McCombs and Roberts, 1978), and the effect of television on family inter-
22 action (Brody, Stoneman, and Sanders, 1980; Hess and Goldman, 1961; Maccoby,
23 1951). These researchers recognized both the widespread use of television
24 and its potential effects. However, none of them addressed the specific
25 parenting behaviors portrayed in television programs.

Purpose and Conceptual Framework

Recognizing that parenting behavior is influenced by factors external to the family and that the average American spends more time watching television than doing anything else but sleeping (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1981), the present study was designed to investigate the nature of parenting behaviors portrayed in family-centered prime-time television programs. Prime time was selected because it is known to attract the largest viewing audience among almost all ages (A.C. Nielsen, 1977).

Definitions of parenting behaviors from both sociology and child development were used as the basis for identifying the nature of parenting behaviors portrayed in prime-time television. The sociological definitions, which described the parental role, were instrumental and expressive.

The instrumental role is traditionally assigned to the male and concerns functions external to the family. The primary area of performance is the occupation-oriented one and the function is to provide for the family (Zelditch, 1974). Within the family system, the performance of this role includes discipline and control over children and final family decision-making (Parsons and Bales, 1955).

The expressive role is, by tradition, given to the female and is concerned primarily with internal family functioning. It includes the bearing and rearing of children and the nurturance of all family members (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). The expressive role is a passive, subservient one, and serves to establish a warm, comforting, nonpunitive emotional climate within the family (Parsons and Bales, 1955).

The child development definitions, based on the work of Baumrind (1971), describe child-rearing patterns as being authoritarian, authoritative, and/or permissive. The authoritarian parent expects high levels of obedience

1 from a child without the need to explain the rationale behind the rule or
2 punishment. The child is taught that all parental actions are oriented
3 toward the good of the child, and the child is not autonomous. An authori-
4 tative parent allows the child autonomy within the framework of the parent-
5 child relationship and within reasonable limits. The child is encouraged to
6 verbalize his/her own ideas and feelings and receives explanations for parental
7 decisions. A permissive parent encourages a high degree of autonomy for the
8 child and avoids exercising parental control. The parent does not see the
9 parental role as one of support and resource for the child.

10 Research questions this study addressed included the following:

- 11 1. To what extent are parenting behaviors portrayed in family-oriented
12 prime-time television programs?
- 13 2. Which types of parental roles (instrumental or expressive) and child
14 rearing patterns (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive)
15 predominate in family-oriented prime-time television programs?
- 16 3. How do children respond to parental role performance and child rear-
17 ing patterns in prime-time television programs?
- 18 4. Does the nature of parental role portrayals or child rearing
19 patterns vary according to the sex of television parents?
- 20 5. Does the nature of children's responses to parenting behaviors vary
21 according to the type of parental roles or child rearing patterns
22 exhibited by television parents?
- 23 6. What are the implications of these television portrayals for parent
24 and family life education and further research?

25 Methodology

26 To collect the data for the study, a sample of family-oriented prime-
27 time television programs was selected, videotaped, and coded.

1 Population and Sample

2 The population for the study included all family-oriented television
3 series aired during prime time in November and December 1982 that had
4 Nielsen Television Ratings of .10 in overall rating or rating for the men's
5 or women's 18-34 year old group (Nielsen Station Index, 1982). Prime-time
6 television programming was defined as that shown between 7:00 and 10:00 p.m.
7 in the midwest on all three major commercial networks (ABC, NBC, CBS).
8 Family-oriented programming was defined as any series with a primary theme
9 that centered on family life and with primary characters that included
10 parent(s) (single parent, dual parents, stepparent(s), adoptive parent(s))
11 and child(ren) of any age under 18 (stepchildren, adoptive children, and
12 natural children). Twelve different television series met these criteria.
13 From these series, a sample of 44 half-hour and hour-long episodes (30
14 hours of programming) was selected. Programs were not selected randomly
15 since programs aired back-to-back during the same time periods and video-
16 taping capability was limited. However, some randomization was incorporated by
17 selecting no more than five episodes of any one series and attempting to
18 code approximately equal numbers of programs and hours of programming on
19 each of the three networks. Advertisements aired during these time periods
20 were not examined.

21 Instrumentation

22 The instrument used to code the parenting behaviors was designed for
23 the study utilizing the research technique, content analysis (Krippendorff,
24 1980; Way, 1983). This methodology allows for the "objective, systematic,
25 and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication"
26 (Berelson, 1952, p. 18) and permits the drawing of "replicable and valid
27 inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21).

The unit of measurement for the instrument was verbalization occurring within the context of parent-child interaction. Coding units were established to reflect both parental role and child rearing pattern. For parental role, phrases or sentences reflecting one main idea, that were spoken by parents immediately prior to a child response, were coded as instrumental, expressive, or neutral. This category of parent-child interaction was felt to partially reflect the context within which the particular patterns of child rearing were occurring. For child rearing pattern, phrases or sentences spoken directly to a child were coded as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neutral. For both categories, child responses were coded as either positive or negative when they occurred as direct verbal responses to the parent, even when they occurred at the end of a series of parental behaviors. If the child was an infant, parent verbalizations were recorded only in the instrumental/expressive category and child response was coded, if it was discernible, by positive (smile, coo) or negative (cry).

To establish content validity, descriptors for each of the coding categories in the instrument were drawn from the appropriate literature and submitted to a panel of three experts in sociology and child development. Only those descriptors which were accepted by all raters were retained. Examples of descriptors for each of the coding units in the instrument are:

Parental Role

Instrumental	takes major responsibility for decision making, discourages emotional dependency, achievement-oriented
Expressive	nurturant, provides security, supportive, enriches environment
Neutral	directions to child in form of request, comment on neutral subject

1 Child Rearing Pattern

- 2 Authoritarian firm enforcer of rules, demanding, uses negative sanctions
- 3 Authoritative encourages discussion with child, flexible, encourages individuality in child
- 4 Permissive allows child to be annoying, avoids confrontation, largely non-directive
- 5 Neutral general comments not intended to be directive

6 Child Response

- 7 Positive okay, sounds good, you're right, um-hum
- 8 Negative no way, forget it, I will not, try to make me

9 To establish inter-coder reliability, three programs were each coded

10 independently by three persons. Overall instrument reliability, according

11 to the r^2 reliability coefficient (Kerlinger, 1973) was .89, reflecting 89

12 percent agreement between coders. Reliability estimates for each of the

13 instrument sub-sections are given in Table 1. In addition to the parental

14 role behaviors, the child rearing style behaviors, and child responses, the

15 final form of the instrument contained space for recording program variables

16 (e.g., network and time), sex of parent, and family structure (e.g., dual

17 parent, single parent).

18

Insert Table 1 about here

19 Results

20 A total of 955 behaviors reflecting parental role were observed, 833

21 reflecting child rearing patterns, and 820 and 508 reflecting child responses,

22 respectively (Table 2). Many of the same behaviors were included in both

23 the parental role and child rearing pattern coding categories. The

24 differences in absolute counts are due to the differences in the coding

25 criteria. Overall, about 20 parenting behaviors were observed per program

26 and 30 per hour of programming. These interactions took up a total of 129

minutes of air time; 3.7 minutes per program. Expressive parental role performance and authoritative child rearing patterns were most prevalent. Positive child responses also far exceeded negative responses.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 presents a breakdown of the instrumental and expressive role performance according to male and female parents, and child response. Overall, more male parental role expressions were observed than were female expressions. In addition, proportionately more child responses occurred when the interaction was between a father and child than between a mother and child. For both mothers and fathers, expressive behaviors were most frequently observed. However, chi-square indicated that mothers exhibited proportionately more expressive behaviors and fathers proportionately more instrumental behaviors ($p \leq .01$).

No significant difference was found in the nature of children's responses to fathers according to the parental role fathers' exhibited. However, there was a difference ($p \leq .001$) according to the parental role mothers exhibited. Children's responses to mothers were much more often positive when mothers were exhibiting instrumental ($X^2 = 14.71$, $p \leq .001$) or neutral ($X^2 = 29.34$, $p \leq .001$) behaviors than when they were exhibiting expressive behaviors.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 presents the authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive child rearing behaviors observed according to the sex of the television parents. Again, more parenting behaviors were identified for males than females and the tendency, for both males and females, was toward authoritative child rearing patterns. However, the television mothers and fathers differed significantly ($p \leq .01$) in the child rearing patterns they portrayed. Fathers were more authoritarian compared to mothers who were both more

authoritative ($X^2 = 8.69, p \leq .01$) and neutral ($X^2 = 5.19, p \leq .05$).

Unlike responses to parental role performance, children's responses to behaviors reflecting child rearing patterns occurred proportionately about as often when the interaction was between a father and child as between a mother and child. No significant differences were found in the nature of children's responses to parental behaviors reflecting child rearing style for mothers. However, there was a highly significant difference ($p \leq .001$) for fathers. Children responded much more positively to fathers' authoritative behaviors than they did to fathers' authoritarian behaviors ($X^2 = 22.55, p \leq .001$). The chi-square contrasts between fathers' authoritarian and permissive, and authoritarian and neutral behaviors were also significant (at $p \leq .05$). However, the differences may be inflated due to the empty cell in each of the cases (Stahl and Hennes, 1980).

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

This study offers further evidence that television is a major source of messages about family roles and interaction patterns, an agent of socialization, that may affect our conceptions and behavior (Ramsdell, 1973; Fisher, 1974). Measures of the frequency of various television portrayals give some indication of the strength of the stimulus viewers are receiving. The present study found the parental role exhibited 31.8 times per hour and child rearing patterns portrayed 27.8 times per hour. Portrayals involving the consumption of alcohol on prime-time and day-time programming occur only up to about four times per hour and yet are believed to comprise a very strong set of messages for viewers (Breed and DeFoe, 1981; Garlington, 1977; Greenberg, Fernandez-Collado, Graef, Korzenny, and Atkin, 1979; Lowry, 1980). Since previous research (Gans, 1968; LoSciuto, 1971) suggests that viewers

1 do identify with and use television as a source of help with their personal
2 lives, it appears television has the potential to influence parenting
3 behavior.

4 What is the nature of this potential influence? Based on the findings,
5 it is clear that males are being portrayed as active parents in family-
6 oriented prime-time television programs. Male television parents consis-
7 tently exhibited greater numbers of parenting behaviors than did female
8 parents, even though female parents outnumbered males in the programs
9 examined.

10 Traditionally, it has been thought that parental role behavior was
11 linked to sex-role socialization. Thus, it was expected that fathers would
12 be portrayed as more instrumental on television and mothers as more expressive.
13 The extent to which this occurred was surprising, however, in light of the
14 family structures represented in the programs coded. Of the 44 programs
15 observed, about twice as many took place in single parent as dual parent
16 settings: 21 percent were single female parent families, 35 percent single
17 male parent; 29 percent dual parent; and 14 percent other, such as cohabita-
18 tion arrangements and non-family groups. Thus, while network television
19 programming appears to be realistically reflecting the documented increase
20 in single parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980), there is little
21 evidence that a concurrent change in parental role performance (i.e., more
22 equal instrumentality and expressivity on the part of mothers and fathers)
23 is being reflected.

24 The intent of coding children's responses to parenting behaviors was
25 to obtain some measure of the kinds of behaviors children were reinforcing.
26 It is interesting that television children were shown reinforcing tele-
27 vision fathers' performance of the parental role to the same degree regard-
28 less of whether it was instrumental, expressive, or neutral. And it was

1 somewhat surprising that the children were shown rejecting mothers'
2 expressive behaviors while rewarding mothers' neutral and instrumental be-
3 haviors. One might speculate that, in the hurry to portray the American
4 family more realistically, network television has inadvertently treated
5 males as more "able" parents than females and capable of eliciting
6 equally favorable responses from their children regardless of the specific
7 parental role they choose to enact.

8 With respect to patterns of child rearing, it was not surprising that
9 fathers were portrayed as more authoritarian than mothers since authoritarian
10 traits have been said to be more commonly male (Safilios-Rothschild, 1977).
11 Thus, it appears that in this area, family-oriented prime-time television
12 programming is also projecting a sense of traditionalism in male and female
13 behavior, despite the attempt to portray non-traditional family patterns.

14 The television children's responses to the various child rearing
15 patterns represent a contrast to their responses to parental role performance.
16 Here, children were shown as being equally accepting of all child rearing
17 patterns exhibited by mothers but not fathers. This is particularly inter-
18 esting in view of Baumrind's (1971) belief that authoritative child rearing
19 patterns are healthiest for both children and their parents. When viewing
20 prime-time family-oriented television, viewers are seeing that healthier
21 parent-child relationships result when fathers are more authoritative than
22 authoritarian, but not so for mothers. If authoritative child rearing
23 behaviors are indeed "healthier," one cannot help but wonder whether such
24 mother-child portrayals will have a negative effect on real world families,
25 especially those headed by single females. Measurement of this "effect" or
26 "non-effect" was beyond the scope of this study. However, in view of these
27 findings, it was comforting to reflect on the fact that authoritative child
28 rearing patterns were portrayed much more often than authoritarian,

1 permissive, and neutral for both males and females.

2 Implications and Future Directions

3 Neilsen surveys indicate that significant numbers of people in the
4 18-34 age group watch family situational programming (A.C. Nielsen, 1977).
5 Many of these people are parents or will become parents in the future.
6 Since television programming may be considered an influential source of
7 learning (Comstock, 1978; Dail, 1983; Postman, 1979), careful attention to
8 program content is warranted. This is particularly important when consider-
9 ing the actual nature of the parental role and the susceptibility it has to
10 outside influence (Clark-Stewart, 1978; Whiting, 1974). Thus, these find-
11 ings have immediate implications for parent and family life education
12 programs.

13 One of the major implications for educational programming stems from
14 the findings that television fathers are shown as more instrumental than
15 television mothers. It may be important, particularly at the secondary
16 level, to encourage students to examine these portrayals in order to pro-
17 mote a more realistic understanding of the maternal role in all family
18 structures represented in today's society. Similarly, it may be necessary
19 to help both males and females understand the nature of expressivity and
20 become more accepting of expressivity on the part of fathers.

21 Other implications relate to the findings that television fathers are
22 portrayed as more authoritarian than mothers and that children's responses
23 to child rearing patterns vary according to sex of the parents. Parent and
24 family life educators could use these portrayals to examine child rearing
25 patterns in relation to sex role stereotyping. Fathers' portrayals could
26 be used to illustrate both the positive and negative effects of adopting
27 various child rearing patterns. Finally, educators could promote critical

1 examination of the real world effects of various parenting behaviors by
2 focusing on the non-existent differential child responses to mothers' child
3 rearing patterns.

4 It has been noted that, to date, few other studies have systematically
5 examined parenting behaviors portrayed in the mass media. None have
6 attempted to investigate the effect of these portrayals on parents and future
7 parents. Thus, there is a great need for much more research in this area.
8 The same content analysis techniques could be applied to parent education
9 literature and other kinds of communication such as radio, newspapers, and
10 television programs besides those which are family-oriented and those aired
11 during prime-time (e.g., movies and talk shows). Advertisements, in printed,
12 audio, and visual forms, may also contain content relevant to parenting
13 behavior. Logitudinal analyses of these messages would be useful to identify
14 changes in content over time and in relation to changes in social structures.

15 Finally, there is a need to analyze the relative effects of formal
16 (e.g., school) and informal (e.g., media) influences on parenting behavior.
17 To do so will not be an easy task and will probably require the development
18 of new theoretical frameworks and use of experimental research designs.
19 Some important questions will likely be (Way, 1983): "What factors con-
20 tribute to 'parent socialization'?" "What are the personal and family
21 inputs to these socialization processes?" "What socialization agents and
22 agent-learner relationships are involved?" "What are the specific sociali-
23 zation outcomes?" "What are the interrelationships between the inputs,
24 processes, and outcomes?" and "How do they change over time?" The effect
25 of television on parenting behavior is not at all well understood, but the
26 findings of the present study raise some interesting questions.

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Table 1

Reliability Estimates for Each of the
Instrument Sub-Sections

Instrumental	.81	Authoritarian	.85
Expressive	.87	Authoritative	.87
Neutral	.89	Permissive	.98
		Neutral	.89
Child Response		.98	

Table 2

Density of Parenting Behaviors in Family-Oriented
Prime-Time Television Programs
(N=44)

Behavior	Total Number	\bar{X} Number Per Program
Instrumental	293	6.65
Expressive	411	9.34
Neutral	<u>251</u>	<u>5.70</u>
Total	955	21.70
Positive Child Response	708	16.09
Negative Child Response	112	2.54
Authoritarian	215	4.88
Authoritative	416	9.45
Permissive	19	0.43
Neutral	<u>183</u>	<u>4.15</u>
Total	833	18.93
Positive Child Response	435	9.88
Negative Child Response	73	1.66

Table 3

Parental Role Performance and Child Responses by Sex of Character

Parental Role ^a	Male Parent (N=26) ^b						Female Parent (N=35) ^c					
			Child Response						Child Response			
			Positive		Negative				Positive		Negative	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Instrumental	189	33	87	27	25	34	104	27	48	41	9	23
Expressive	220	39	134	42	31	43	191	49	24	20	28	72
Neutral	<u>156</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>97</u>	31	<u>17</u>	23	<u>95</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>46</u>	39	<u>2</u>	5
Total	565	100	318		73		390	100	118		39	

^a χ^2 for total male/female behaviors = 9.81, 2df, $p \leq .01$

^b χ^2 child response to father = 2.05, 2df, $p > .05$

^c χ^2 child response to mother = 36.93, 2df, $p \leq .001$

Table 4

Behaviors Reflecting Child Rearing Patterns and Child Responses
by Sex of Character

Child Rearing Pattern ^a	Male Parent (N=26)						Female Parent (N=35)					
			Child Response ^b						Child Response ^c			
			Positive		Negative				Positive		Negative	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Authoritarian	146	29	55	22	29	78	69	20	41	22	6	21
Authoritative	232	47	135	54	14	22	184	55	108	58	19	68
Permissive	15	3	9	4	0	0	4	1	3	2	0	0
Neutral	104	21	50	20	2	4	79	24	34	18	3	11
Total	497		249		45		336		186		28	

^a χ^2 for total male/female behaviors = 12.27, 3df, $p \leq .01$

^b χ^2 for child response to father = 34.74, 3df, $p \leq .001$

^c χ^2 for child response to mother = 1.25, 3df, $p > .05$